

# An Uncommonly Misspent Life

*Such is the verdict of history on Henry Tufts, a one-man crime wave whose colorful autobiography depicts a colonial New England filled with sharpers and whipping posts, thieving tavern owners, scapegraces, and loose women. Article by G.W. Helfrich.*

**I**N the year 1807 the printing office of Samuel Bragg, Jun., of Dover, New Hampshire, issued a 366-page book entitled *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels and Sufferings of Henry Tufts, Now Residing at Lemington [sic], in the District of Maine, in Substance as Compiled from His Own Mouth*. The literary judgment in New Hampshire of Tufts' work was rigorous. The state promptly shut down upon Tufts; a mob of townspeople from Dover, which Tufts called "the land of alewives, lawyers, and clay," burned the printery, and Samuel Bragg, Jun., was so overcome that he died of a "broken heart." Persons of the name of Tufts bought as many copies of the book as they could find and destroyed them. After this, the name of Henry Tufts vanishes from the public prints.

In March, 1888, *Harper's Magazine* published an essay on Tufts entitled "A New England Vagabond," by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Years later this essay was brought to the attention of the noted connoisseur of crime, Edmund Pearson, and in 1930 Pearson's slightly abridged second edition appeared under the title *The Autobiography of a Criminal*.

In an earlier age Henry Tufts might have cut purses with Villon or drawn the bow with Robin Hood. Tufts tailored his skills to his time and place. He was, for instance, a virtuoso in the art of horse stealing. Some fifty separate thefts of this kind are recorded in the book. He could paint a horse so well that its former owner, riding by its side, could not recognize it. Tufts' usual modus operandi was to steal a horse, ride twenty miles, exchange it for another horse, and make several more exchanges before reaching home. In addition to horses, Tufts stole pigs, dogs, beehives, turkeys, sheep,

**"In addition to horses, Tufts stole pigs, dogs, beehives, turkeys, sheep, flax, linen, household furniture, and, not least, other men's wives and daughters."**

flax, linen, household furniture, and, not least, other men's wives and daughters. Shoemaking must have been a precarious trade to practice in those days, for breaking into a shoemaker's shop (called "cracking a crabkin") was a common crime. If he needed clothing Tufts helped himself from the nearest clothesline. "I can't find Grandfather's shirt," cries a young woman. "No matter," says the mother, "you will find it in the morning." "Knowing they would experience a disappointment," Tufts wrote, "I hastened along."

"All men," wrote an earlier autobiographer, Benvenuto Cellini, "who have done anything of merit, or which verily has a semblance of merit, if so be they are men of truth and good repute, should write the tale of their own life with their own hand. Yet it were best they should not set out on so fine an enterprise till they have passed their fortieth year." Like Cellini, who was apparently being harassed by his editor to meet a deadline, Tufts employed a ghostwriter. The name of Tufts' ghostwriter is not known, although two persons have been suggested—a Major Thomas Tash, of New Durham, and "a clever young lawyer, of Dover," which, as Pearson notes, sounds like the first line of a limerick. Tufts' ghostwriter was an accomplished Latinist. He mentions Ovid and Virgil and Cicero, and also Milton and Sterne.

Tufts was well past forty when his autobiography first appeared. As for merit, Tufts' life is of interest to us precisely for its lack of merit. It is almost certainly the first extensive criminal autobiography to be published in America. Tufts thus began a line that has come down to us through Jesse James, Hutchins Hapgood, Gerald Chapman, and Joseph Bonanno. Tufts went to and fro in the world and walked up and





down in it — from Nova Scotia to Virginia — and whenever he needed anything, he took it. His entire career was spent either fleeing from the law or else giving the law reason to pursue him.

The fourth of Cellini's postulates remains: truthfulness. The style of the book is picaresque, high-flown, often preposterous. Pearson thought that there is large percentage of truth in Henry Tufts. But it is possible, wrote Pearson, "that he so respected the truth that he looked upon it with awe: as something to be dealt out with caution." Clearly, there are truth-stretchers in Tufts' book, and the reader must not believe everything he reads. Tufts' autobiography may justly lay claim to being America's first "nonfiction novel," 159 years before Truman Capote.

**H**ENRY Tufts was born at Newmarket, New Hampshire, on June 24, 1748. His grandfather, a graduate of Harvard College in 1701, was born in Devonshire, England, and died as a clergyman in Boston. His father was an honest tailor. As for Henry, like any boxer, acrobat, violinist, or thief, to acquire excellence in his trade, he began young. Tufts was to the manner born, and the flowering of his genius was not retarded by compulsory education. As a boy he laid a scheme with two companions to steal bread, cheese, and cucumbers. While one lad was acquiring the bread and cheese, Tufts and the other boy stripped the vines of a cucumber yard. As the boys sat down to dinner, Tufts was struck by the notion that he would rather have the whole plunder than share it. Slyly, he picked up a stone, struck one of the boys on the back with it, and cried out, "They are coming in pursuit of us." The boys took to their heels running in different directions, but Tufts stole back and carried off the booty. A lesser rascal might have been content with that, but the next day Tufts told his friends that he had been overtaken by the farmer, who exacted three days' labor from him, so that each of the other boys gave him a day's work on his father's farm as their share of the "penalty."

It is written in the Hebrew annals that the man who gives his son neither property, education, nor trade, brings him up to be a thief. Piqued by his father's parsimony in refusing to give him a share of his estate when he attained his majority, Tufts verified the truth of the proverb by stealing his father's horse and selling it for thirty dollars.

Tufts then moved to Nottingham, New Hampshire, where he made the acquaintance of a woman named Sally Hall. A courtship followed, and Sally became pregnant. Fortunately, Tufts was well furnished with cash at the time, and by a judicious distribution of bribes, Sally was brought to settle for ten dollars. The affair made a deep impression on Tufts. From then on, he lost little time in finding a complaisant female in every town he visited.

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His Victorian-age essayist, Colonel Higginson, clucked, "The whole book is like a Kirmesse of Rubens or Teniers, and many passages will not bear quotation." But Pearson did not bowdlerize his later edition, instead allowing Tufts to recite his lecheries smugly and without interference. Indeed, this is the chief value of the book. There are no tiwigged members of the Continental Congress in Tufts' narrative; Tufts' New England is a vividly described world of sharpers and whipping-posts, of drunken and thieving tavern owners, scapegraces, and loose women.

**A**FTER the contretemps with Sally Hall, Tufts returned to his parents' farm, but soon thereafter he met and married an older woman, Lydia Bickford. The newlyweds moved to Lee, Massachusetts, and Tufts writes, unconvincingly, that "my vices lay listless and dormant ... and were fast progressing towards oblivion." But this halcyon period was not to last. Six months later Tufts was accused of a crime he did not commit, and so "I resolved to forsake Lee, [leaving] my wife and tenderchild to the mercy of an unfeeling world. ..." The book bubbles over with false sentiments of this kind. Throughout the rest of his life, he would forsake Lydia again and again, returning home to find his family destitute, "wherefore I resorted, almost necessarily, to the old trade of pilfering."

In the Town of Saco in the District of Maine, Tufts met a man named Dennis, "by nation a Hibernian." The two burglarized a store in that town. Traveling westward six or eight miles, they deposited their booty at the house of one Richard Dutton, a friend of Dennis'. After a night of good cheer and drink, Dennis and Dutton went out to sell a few trinkets. But they sold too cheaply, arousing the suspicions of their customers. The two were apprehended, and the ministers of justice set off for Dutton's house in quest of Tufts.

Dennis and Tufts were sent to Falmouth (now Portland) and confined in irons. After they tried to burn down the jail in an unsuccessful attempt to escape, the two prisoners were sent to the Old York jail. Nineteen days later Tufts was released on condition he would agree to ship as a sailor on a three-month voyage to the West Indies from Newburyport and he set out on foot with a guard. Before they reached their destination, however, the guard stopped at a tavern, telling Tufts to continue the journey and that he would overtake him

shortly. After traveling three-quarters of a mile, Tufts confesses that "[I] was so unfortunate as to miss my way, and I never came across my deliverer afterwards."

Tufts would be in and out of jails, dungeons, and chains for the next thirty years. In addition to the Falmouth and York jails, the latter being probably the only one still surviving, he spent time at Dover, Exeter



(eight times), Newburyport, Ipswich, Salem, and — after a narrow escape from the gallows — at the infamous Castle William in Boston Harbor.

Medicine and theology have always had a particular attraction for rogues. Tufts practiced both. He learned Indian physic and botany from that most noted of Indian woman doctors, Moll Ockett. In the early 1770s he injured himself severely with a knife, and was advised to visit the native Americans of Sudbury, Canada, who would cure him "if the thing were morally possible." ("Sudbury" has since been identified as Bethel, Maine.) Moll dosed him with a variety of roots, herbs, barks, and other simples, and within two months Tufts was able to get about. Patients came to Moll Ockett from far and near and it was not lost on Tufts that she always had a considerable sum of money on hand. For once, instead of taking the money and running, he took great pains to study her methods and medicines. This knowledge would prove useful to him for the rest of his life.

"Now had the more vertical rays of propitious Phoebus subdued the rigors of the inclement year [and] ... renewed the beauties of the vernal bloom, and restored to the animate world the festive joys of a mild atmosphere." That is to say, spring arrived and Tufts contracted a third marriage, this time to an Indian maiden. (His second brief marriage had been to Sally Judd, of Claremont, New Hampshire, in 1771. He was forced to decamp when Sally learned of Lydia.) Observing that a sailor is said to have a wife in every port, Tufts supposed himself entitled to a like privilege, though belonging to a different element.

**O**N his return in 1775 from the Indian territory, Tufts made the first of his many enlistments in the Continental army. He joined, he says, because it was a more honorable life than thieving, although, he added, "a soldier can be a thief." He generally ended up deserting, but on this occasion he served his full two months' term. His officers and fellow soldiers appreciated his talents for liberating pork and rum and other necessities to supplement his company's short commons.

Between one desertion and the next enlistment, Tufts, out of curiosity, began attending the meetings of a set of religionists, styled New Lights, "who pretended to far greater sanctity than their neighbors." Having the gift of mimicry and possessed of a tenacious memory, Tufts was soon regaling his cronies with his skill as a preacher. He then invested in a new suit of black, a large Scotch plaid gown, and a cocked-up beaver hat — the clerical costume of the day — and set off for the Kennebec country.

In a town in the District of Maine called Little Falls he attended a lecture. Observing his clerical dress the officiating minister asked him to address the congre-

gation. When he finished, the parson averred that Tufts had preached as loud a sermon to his soul as ever he had witnessed, and he believed he was in the presence of a heaven-born saint. Upon this, a young woman named Peggy Cotton arose and said, "He a saint? So is the devil incarnate; for my own part I have no belief in his pretended sanctity." Asked to explain herself, she continued, "I took notice, on his entrance into the meeting, that he first surveyed my face, then my feet, then my whole person, in such a carnal way and manner, that I perceived he had the devil in his heart." Tufts "could not but admire at the intuitive sagacity of the young gypsy, who was able to hit off, so adroitly, [his] real character." But the odds were against poor Peggy. After the parson reprimanded her, and Tufts expatiated on the excellency of Christian charity and forbearance, Peggy withdrew from the field. Tufts continued on his preaching tour, and was able to bring home a "seasonable relief for domestic exigencies."

At home again with Lydia, in Lee, Massachusetts, Tufts found he was no better than a nuisance; fearful of being seen and brought to justice, he could earn nothing. Back on the road, hoping to visit his second wife, Sally Judd, in Claremont, New Hampshire, he added a new paragraph to his curriculum vitae — dealing in counterfeit money. Putting up at a tavern, Tufts, flush with money after several episodes of thievery, met a genteel stranger named Whiting, whom he befriended. During the evening Whiting confessed that he was a British agent, engaged to circulate counterfeit money, and he was happy to exchange one thousand counterfeit dollars for a little of Tufts' genuine silver. Tufts had no difficulty in passing the spurious bills and, since the currency was depreciating daily, he bought a good horse, and a new suit for himself, and some apparel for Sally. He further atoned for his past transgressions by presenting Sally with fifty counterfeit dollars. He then sold his horse for money and goods, "which articles I transported like an honest man" back to Lydia.

**I**N the spring of 1794 Tufts, for the first time, got into serious trouble. In 1786 under the fictitious name of Gideon Garland, Tufts had married Abigail Kennison, a young widow. During a period of relative tranquility in Fairfield, Maine, Tufts practiced medicine and magic, among other pursuits. His "dear Nabby," however, was not content with this vagabond existence, and Henry and his latest family settled in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

According to Tufts, he pursued the way of truth and uprightness in Marblehead. He hired a room, purchased some apothecary's drugs, gathered a far-rago of roots, herbs, barks, and such as entitled him to the reputation of a "pharmacopolist," and cleared the

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## A Misspent Life

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then-princely sum of three dollars a day. The fame of Doctor Tufts soon spread far and wide. Then, one day, he bought from John Stewart one silver tablespoon and five silver teaspoons in return for a fus-tian coat and a pair of stockings. One morning a visitor to Tufts' lodgings espied the spoons and informed their former owner, Daniel Jacobs. Tufts was apprehended. Stewart was brought forward, but after a private conference with the sheriff, who was no friend of Tufts, Stewart took leg bail and was seen no more. Tufts was thrown into jail to await his trial.

For the first time in his life, Tufts had come before a court of sufficient importance to leave records, and thus his post-humous editor, the sedulous Edmund Pearson, was able to reconstruct the court's version of the events of that spring and summer and compare them with Tufts' story. Pearson's findings appear as a sort of postscript to his edition. This is what Pearson found:

As early as January 9, 1794, according to the records of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Tufts pleaded guilty to passing base metal. He was fined the costs of prosecution, and received one hour in the pillory and fifteen strokes on the back. On the eve of April 19, Tufts broke into a shop in Ipswich and stole nine raccoon skins, six hats, and two cat skins. That same night he committed burglary in two shoemaking shops, several miles away in Hamilton and in Wenham. (Tufts moved swiftly.) At the June term of the supreme court, Tufts pleaded guilty to all of these offenses, but failed to mention any of them in his own narrative. Apparently, he was never sentenced for these crimes because the far more serious crime, stealing the spoons, was punishable by death. Pearson surmised that the only reason Tufts risked trial for the graver charge was that he thought he could beat it. He was ably represented by Samuel Sewell, later a judge of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and Nathan Dane, founder of the Dane professorship of law at Harvard. There were, however, no psychiatrists in that benighted day to testify on his behalf and, needless to say, his record did not help him. On June 24, 1794, Tufts was sentenced to hang.

Under condemnation of death Tufts was put into rigid confinement and loaded down with chains. He made no effort to escape. "At this deplorable season," Tufts writes, "an uncommon stupor benumbed

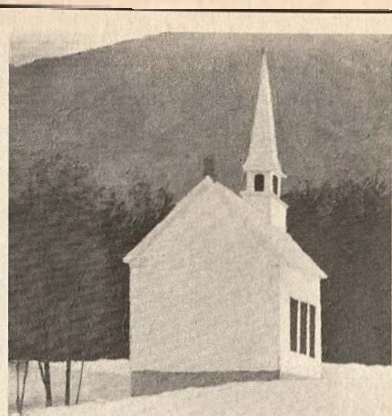
my intellect; the usual fertility of my invention abandoned me." The reader can readily believe this.

Next came the petitions. Nabby, one of Tufts' wives, along with one of the jurymen, the "ladies of Ipswich," and the students of Harvard all solicited reprieve from Governor Samuel Adams, but no answers were received. In the meantime Tufts was visited in jail by a physician who bid two guineas for his skeleton, and by a gentleman from Newburyport who offered him seventy dollars for the rights to publish his narrative. Tufts declined both offers. On the morning of August 14, the date set for his execution, Tufts desecrated the sexton passing by with pickaxe, hoe, and shovel, to dig his grave beneath the gallows. An hour or two later a schoolmistress, looking through his window, informed him that his coffin was being made. Tufts is at his most eloquent in describing his intolerable suspense — the passing of the hour of hanging, the harsh silence of Governor Adams, and the uncertainty in which he lingered until September 18, when word finally came that his sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life at Castle William in Boston Harbor.

**T**UFTS passes quickly over his years at Castle William. His fellow prisoners, he writes, were a motley crew of all colors, nations, and languages, but mostly American. He found them a "heterogeneous mixture of vile miscreants and execrable wretches... the dregs of human nature; the refuse and off-scouring of the whole globe." The principal employment was nail-making, the provisions coarse bread and tainted bullock heads. His only source of comfort was Nabby, who brought him clothing and cordials.

In 1798, Tufts was transferred to the jail at Salem. He escaped within a half-hour, "musing as I went, upon the versatility of human affairs." The question that now faced Tufts was whether to return to his old wife Lydia or his young wife Nabby. Tufts decided on the old wife, although, he says, it pained him to quit Abigail, the mother of four of his children, who had stuck by him when he was deserted by every other person and whom he professed to love beyond all women on earth. Tufts said goodbye to Nabby in a high-sounding letter, and removed to Limington in the District of Maine where Lydia was now living with their two sons. He purchased a piece of land, built a

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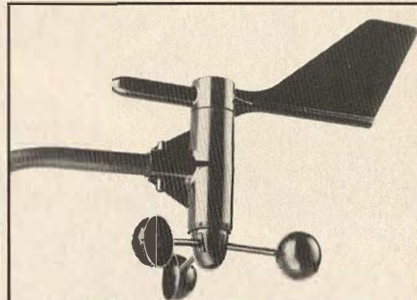
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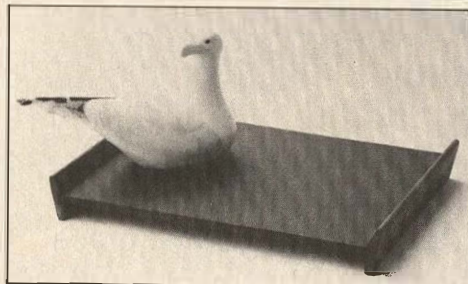
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"small but commodious dwelling house," and spent his time either in clearing the land or playing doctor. His marches took him to Alfred and Wells and Waterboro and Portland, as far afield as Nova Scotia and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He had relinquished preaching, and as for theft, he considered that "a reprobated resource which I had solemnly renounced forever."

This did not prevent Doctor Tufts from stealing a neighboring farmer's eighteen-year-old daughter, whom he had cured. The girl's gratitude excited Tufts' ardor, and they rode off into the wilderness. But after four months and one thousand miles the girl's father caught up with them, and Tufts was forced to return to the long-suffering Lydia. He was then between fifty and sixty years of age. He seems to have passed his declining years quietly and died, it is written, at the home of his eldest son Simeon, in Limerick, Maine, on January 31, 1831, in essayist Higginson's words, "in the eighty-third year of an uncommonly misspent life."

When Tufts' posthumous editor, Pearson, visited Limington in 1930, he wrote that, "It is a pretty village, although its many scattered and deserted farms make it seem a melancholy one." In Pearson's day, a few of the older residents, especially those named Tufts, recalled that they heard their fathers speak of the author, whom they remembered as the "Doctor."

Today, sixty years after Pearson visited Limington, there are even fewer mementoes remaining of Tufts' life. One Limington resident possesses a receipt in the hand of Henry Tufts drawn on the town treasurer for the sum of twenty-five dollars to pay for medicine and attendance on the family of one Nason, deceased. It is dated December 22, 1817. There are no longer any Tufts in the vicinity, but in a small cemetery plot on Dole's Ridge Road, across from the site where Tufts' house once stood, stands Simeon Tufts' headstone. There is nothing to mark the grave of Henry, if he is indeed buried there. Tufts' "small but commodious dwelling house" has since been moved up the road and is today used as a garage. His enduring monument is his account of the late 1700s — a panorama of low, lusty, brutal, desperate New England. Contrary to Shakespeare's conclusions — in the case of the incorrigible scoundrel of Limington — the evil Henry Tufts did was interred with his bones; it is instead the good that lives after.